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REVIEW BY CHENGZHI YIN, BOSTON COLLEGE

In "The Chinese Advisory Groups in the First Indochina War," Xiaohe Cheng addresses important developments in security cooperation within the Communist camp in early Cold War history. The article discusses the formation, evolution, and disbandment of Chinese advisory groups in Vietnam between 1950 and 1956.

Beijing's involvement in the first Vietnam war is well known.¹ As the Soviet Union showed little interest in supporting revolutions in Southeast Asia, China played an important role in the Viet Minh victory over the French Army. In addition to providing large quantities of arms and food to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), China also sent military and political advisory groups to assist the Viet Minh in its war with France. Although the literature on Chinese cooperation with the Viet Minh is vast, most studies focus on either why China supported the Viet Minh or how China's military and economic assistance contributed to the Viet Minh victory.² More specifically, recent books analyze in detail how the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG) helped the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) transform from insurgent forces to an institutionalized regular army.³

In contrast, the literature pays limited attention to the Chinese advisory groups in themselves. It has not offered satisfactory answers to questions of how Beijing selected advisors, assigned particular tasks, and adjusted the structures of its advisory groups based on interactions between Chinese advisors and their Vietnamese counterparts. Cheng's article fills these gaps. Using Chinese primary and secondary sources, Cheng presents a comprehensive and reliable picture of the evolution of the Chinese advisory groups in the first Vietnam war.

¹ Han Xiaorong, "Revolution Knows No Boundaries? Chinese Revolutionaries in North Vietnam during the Early Years of the First Indochina War," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52:2 (2021): 246-74. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463421000412>; Charles Kraus, "A border region 'exuded with militant friendship': Provincial narratives of China's participation in the First Indochina War, 1949-1954," *Cold War History* 12:3 (2012): 495-514. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2011.627919>.

² For instance, see, Laura Marie Calkins, *China and the First Vietnam War, 1947-54* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Writing Team for the History of Chinese Military Advisory Group, *Zhongguo junshi guwentuan yuanyue kangfa douzheng shishi* [Historical Facts About the Chinese Military Advisory Group's Assist-Vietnam and Resist-France Struggle] (Beijing: Junshi Chubanshe, 1990); Zhai Qiang, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 10-38.

³ Christopher Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam* (Princeton University Press, 2022), 74-80, 250-263; Li Xiaobing, *Building Ho's Army: Chinese Military Assistance to North Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019).

Chen's article establishes that upon the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh's request in 1950, the Chinese leadership quickly sent personnel to investigate the situation in Vietnam and prepared to form an advisory group (197-198). It shows that China's Central Military Commission (CMC) decided to offer corps of advisors with various rankings and responsibilities. The CMC also laid out specific recruitment criteria, illustrating their emphasis on both combat experience and ideological awareness (199). Additionally, the article documents the division of labor among key Chinese figures who were responsible for Vietnam-related affairs, the assignments of different corps of advisors to the PAVN's divisions and regiments, and the tasks of some advisors working for the Vietnamese military school in China (202-203).

Cheng's research also reveals the rise and fall of the Chinese Political Advisory Group (CPAG), an important component of the history of Chinese advisory groups that has received little attention from researchers. The literature on Chinese cooperation with the Viet Minh largely focuses on the CMAG, not its civilian colleagues. Studies examine how the CMAG contributed to the PAVN's victory.⁴ However, this story of the Chinese advisory groups is incomplete. China not only contributed to the Viet Minh military victory, but also helped Ho Chi Minh consolidate the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) and develop the DRV's economy. As Cheng establishes, Chinese political advisors played a critical role in solving political and economic issues the DRV faced in the early 1950s. According to his research, Chinese leaders realized that in addition to advising on military affairs, they also needed to help the DRV deal with issues of developing political parties, government, land reform, economy, and propaganda. As a result, China sent financial, economic, and trade advisors to the DRV after 1950 (203-204). Later, the CMAG and the CPAG were merged into one while the name CMAG remained unchanged (205).

Chinese cooperation with the DRV was not harmonious. To make the Chinese advisory groups work effectively, there were many obstacles to overcome. As Cheng notes, the way some Chinese advisors worked upset their Vietnamese comrades; they also disagreed with the Vietnamese on both strategic and tactical issues (204-205). Chinese leaders were aware of these clashes and realized that they needed to adjust the advisory groups correspondingly. A Chinese report documented the Vietnamese criticism of Chinese advisors and thus suggested that Chinese advisors take precautions when criticizing the Vietnamese. On a different occasion, Liu Shaoqi instructed the advisors to make suggestions only, and leave the final choices to the Vietnamese (201). Another prominent difficulty stemmed from the reluctance of some advisors to work in Vietnam, which was war-ravaged, and thus life there was difficult. Many Chinese advisors were thus anxious when posted there. Cheng's article records how the Chinese leadership addressed this issue: they streamlined the advisory groups, compensated and rotated advisors, and enhanced their ideological education (206).

After the DRV's triumph at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference, the need for Chinese advisors declined and therefore their roles needed to be rearranged. Cheng shows that after China established its embassy in the DRV, many advisors shifted their working affiliation to the embassy or were employed by the DRV (210). In 1955, China proposed to gradually withdraw its advisors; by 1956 Chinese military advisors had returned to China.

A great strength of Cheng's article is his use of Chinese source materials. Cheng accessed the archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CC-CPC), the International Department of the CC-CPC, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the People's Liberation Army. This research is valuable since researchers' access to these materials is increasingly limited. Therefore, Cheng offers great insight in the China-DRV relations in this critical period. In addition, he cites official histories to complement the use of Chinese primary sources. In all, Cheng offers an extensive study using Chinese sources on the rise and fall of these advisory groups in the first Vietnam war.

In addition to Chinese official archives, Cheng's article also makes good use of interviews with former advisors and materials collected by family members of Luo Guibo and Wei Guoqing, the two key leaders of the Chinese advisory groups. These

⁴ For instance, see, Bifu Wu and Yanping Zheng, "Mimi yuanyue kangfa de zhongguo junshi guwentuan [Chinese Military Advisory Group in the Secret Assisting-Vietnam and Resisting-France War]," *Wenshi Bolan* 3 (2005): 49-51; and Zhai Qiang, "Transplanting the Chinese Model: Chinese Military Advisers and the First Vietnam War, 1950-1954," *The Journal of Military History* 57:4 (1993): 689-715.

materials are highly valuable as they offer first-hand perspectives that could complement the material found in official archives. In addition, the use of these types of materials could be illustrative to researchers. Scholars of Cold War history, particularly those studying China's relations with Southeast Asian states in the Cold War, often have very limited access to the official state archives of China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian states. Conducting interviews and exploring collections of personal documents could help researchers overcome these obstacles and provide new perspectives into research on Cold War history.

But Cheng's use of primary sources contains one weakness, as the article gives minimum attention to Vietnamese-language materials. With the exception of the article's literature review section, Cheng cites only Chinese sources. Although this is understandable since his research intends to examine the evolution of the Chinese advisory groups, he discusses clashes between Chinese advisors and local Vietnamese cadres and examines how China reorganized its advisory groups in response to these clashes. Citing Vietnamese sources would have revealed the Vietnamese perspective of the Chinese advisory groups, perhaps validated Chinese primary sources, and thus provided a more complete picture of these advisory groups. Nonetheless, limited access to VWP and PAVN archives hinders any research on China-DRV cooperation. Until researchers have greater access to Vietnamese archives, Cheng's article will stand as a comprehensive and detailed account of the Chinese advisory groups.

Another weakness of the article is the disconnect between the evolution of the Chinese advisory groups and the strategic context in the first Vietnam war. As Cheng makes clear, security and ideological factors prompted the Chinese leadership to send advisory groups to Vietnam. Moreover, when discussing the adjustment and withdrawal of the advisory groups, Cheng's article touches on Beijing's considerations, such as its policy priority in Indochina and the Soviet aid after the Geneva Conference. However, the article focuses on describing how Beijing selected advisors and later streamlined the advisory groups, while giving limited attention to the question of why these decisions were made. China sent advisors to help the DRV win the war against France. Thus, the strategic environment in Indochina affected the structures of the Chinese advisory groups. For instance, Beijing sent political advisors to help Ho Chi Minh consolidate his regime and transform North Vietnam into a single-party state. This in turn secured China's southeast border and thus contributed to China's security. In addition, the adjustment of the advisory groups in 1952 and 1953 not only responded to the advisors' reluctance to work in Vietnam, but also reflected the coordination of strategies between Beijing and Hanoi. These are areas that could be explored in the future.

Finally, Cheng could situate his article in the literature on Chinese cooperation with the DRV by citing the scholarly literature on the topic. Cheng's article sheds light on an important component of Chinese assistance to the DRV. Nonetheless, it pays limited attention to secondary sources that relate the evolution of the Chinese advisory groups to other research topics of the first Vietnam war.⁵ Better integration of secondary sources would help to contextualize the article's arguments, and the article could then speak to a wider audience.

Overall, this article makes an important contribution to the study of early Cold War history. It offers an informative story of the Chinese advisory groups in the first Vietnam War. Instead of examining the effects of these groups on Viet Minh victory, Cheng focuses on these groups themselves, highlighting how China formed, adjusted, and eventually disbanded its advisory groups. Our understanding of the first Vietnam War requires us to understand the evolution of the Chinese advisory groups. Cheng's article provides a solid foundation for future studies of these groups.

⁵ Chen Jian, "China and the First Indo-China War, 1950-54," *The China Quarterly* 133 (1993): 85-110. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000018208>; Li Xiaobing, *The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Zhai, "Transplanting the Chinese Model," 689-715.

Chengzhi Yin is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Boston College. His research interests include alliance politics, Chinese foreign policy, and Cold War history. He is the author of “China’s Military Assistance to North Vietnam Revisited,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 26:3 (2019): 226-256.